**Through the Looking Glass: Independent Reading**

**Cultural/Racial Identity**

* **When I was Puerto Rican-Esmerelda Santiago**

Esmeralda Santiago's story begins in rural Puerto Rico, where her childhood was full of both tenderness and domestic strife, tropical sounds and sights as well as poverty. Growing up, she learned the proper way to eat a guava, the sound of tree frogs in the mango groves at night, the taste of the delectable sausage called *morcilla*, and the formula for ushering a dead baby's soul to heaven. As she enters school we see the clash, both hilarious and fierce, of Puerto Rican and Yankee culture. When her mother, Mami, a force of nature, takes off to New York with her seven, soon to be eleven children, Esmeralda, the oldest, must learn new rules, a new language, and eventually take on a new identity

* **The Color of Water-James McBride (Memoir)**

The son of a black minister and a woman who would not admit she was white, James McBride grew up in "orchestrated chaos" with his eleven siblings in the poor, all-black projects of Red Hook, Brooklyn. "Mommy," a fiercely protective woman with "dark eyes full of pep and fire," herded her brood to Manhattan's free cultural events, sent them off on buses to the best (and mainly Jewish) schools, demanded good grades, and commanded respect. As a young man, McBride saw his mother as a source of embarrassment and worry.

* **When Broken Glass Floats: Growing Up Under the Khmer Rouge-Chanrinthy Him (Memoir)**

In the Cambodian proverb, "when broken glass floats" is the time when evil triumphs over good. That time began in 1975, when the Khmer Rouge took power in Cambodia and the Him family began their trek through the hell of the "killing fields." In a mesmerizing story, Him vividly recounts a Cambodia where rudimentary labor camps are the norm and technology, such as cars and electricity, no longer exists. Death becomes a companion at the camps, along with illness. Yet through the terror, Chanrithy's family remains loyal to one another despite the Khmer Rouge's demand of loyalty only to itself. Moments of inexpressible sacrifice and love lead them to bring what little food they have to the others, even at the risk of their own lives. In 1979, "broken glass" finally sinks. From a family of twelve, only five of the Him children survive. Sponsored by an uncle in Oregon, they begin their new lives in a land that promises welcome to those starved for freedom.

* **They Poured Fire on Us from the Sky: The Story of Three Lost Boys from Sudan-Benjamin Ajak**

Benjamin, Alepho, and Benson were raised among the Dinka tribe of Sudan. Their world was an insulated, close-knit community of grass-roofed cottages, cattle herders, and tribal councils. The lions and pythons that prowled beyond the village fences were the greatest threat they knew. All that changed the night the government-armed Murahiliin began attacking their villages. Amid the chaos, screams, conflagration, and gunfire, five-year-old Benson and seven-year-old Benjamin fled into the dark night. Two years later, Alepho, age seven, was forced to do the same. Across the Southern Sudan, over the next five years, thousands of other boys did likewise, joining this stream of child refugees that became known as the Lost Boys. Their journey would take them over one thousand miles across a war-ravaged country, through landmine-sown paths, crocodile-infested waters, and grotesque extremes of hunger, thirst, and disease. The refugee camps they eventually filtered through offered little respite from the brutality they were fleeing

* **Almost a Woman-Esmerelda Santiago (Memoir)**

"Negi," as Santiago's family affectionately calls her, leaves rural Macún in 1961 to live in a three-room tenement apartment with seven young siblings, an inquisitive grandmother, and a strict mother who won't allow her to date. At thirteen, Negi yearns for her own bed, privacy, and a life with her father, who remains in Puerto Rico. Translating for Mami at the welfare office in the morning, starring as Cleopatra at New York's prestigious Performing Arts High School in the afternoons, and dancing salsa all night, she yearns to find balance between being American and being Puerto Rican.

* **Joy Luck Club-Amy Tan (Fiction)**

Four mothers, four daughters, four families whose histories shift with the four winds depending on who's "saying" the stories. In 1949 four Chinese women, recent immigrants to San Francisco, begin meeting to eat dim sum, play mahjong, and talk. United in shared unspeakable loss and hope, they call themselves the Joy Luck Club. Rather than sink into tragedy, they choose to gather to raise their spirits and money. "To despair was to wish back for something already lost. Or to prolong what was already unbearable." Forty years later the stories and history continue.

* **Snow Flower and the Secret Fan- Linda See (Fiction)**

In nineteenth-century China, in a remote Hunan county, a girl named Lily, at the tender age of seven, is paired with a laotong, an “old same,” in an emotional match that will last a lifetime. The laotong, Snow Flower, introduces herself by sending Lily a silk fan on which she’s written a poem in nu shu, a unique language that Chinese women created in order to communicate in secret, away from the influence of men. As the years pass, Lily and Snow Flower send messages on the fan and compose stories on handkerchiefs, reaching out of isolation to share their hopes, dreams, and accomplishments. Together they endure the agony of footbinding and reflect upon their arranged marriages, their loneliness, and the joys and tragedies of motherhood. The two find solace in their friendship, developing a bond that keeps their spirits alive. But when a misunderstanding arises, their relationship suddenly threatens to tear apart.

* **Memoirs of a Geisha-Arthur Golden (Fiction)**

Speaking to us with the wisdom of age and in a voice at once haunting and startlingly immediate, Nitta Sayuri tells the story of her life as a geisha. It begins in a poor fishing village in 1929, when, as a nine-year-old girl with unusual blue-gray eyes, she is taken from her home and sold into slavery to a renowned geisha house. We witness her transformation as she learns the rigorous arts of the geisha: dance and music; wearing kimono, elaborate makeup, and hair; pouring sake to reveal just a touch of inner wrist; competing with a jealous rival for men's solicitude and the money that goes with it.

* **Ball Don’t Lie-Matt de la Pena (Fiction)**

Sticky is a beat-around-the-head foster kid with nowhere to call home but the street, and an outer shell so tough that no one will take him in. He started out life so far behind the pack that the finish line seems nearly unreachable. He’s a white boy living and playing in a world where he doesn’t seem to belong. But Sticky can ball. And basketball might just be his ticket out . . . if he can only realize that he doesn’t have to be the person everyone else expects him to be.

* **Bookseller of Kabul-Asne Seierstad (Nonfiction)**

This mesmerizing portrait of a proud man who, through three decades and successive repressive regimes, heroically braved persecution to bring books to the people of Kabul has elicited extraordinary praise throughout the world and become a phenomenal international bestseller. *The Bookseller of Kabul* is startling in its intimacy and its details - a revelation of the plight of Afghan women and a window into the surprising realities of daily life in today's Afghanistan.

* **Brick Lane-Monica Ali (Fiction)**

After an arranged marriage to Chanu, a man twenty years older, Nazneen is taken to London, leaving her home and heart in the Bangladeshi village where she was born. Her new world is full of mysteries. How can she cross the road without being hit by a car . What is the secret of her bullying neighbor Mrs. Islam? What is a Hell's Angel? And how must she comfort the naÏve and disillusioned Chanu? As a good Muslim girl, Nazneen struggles to not question why things happen. She submits, as she must, to Fate and devotes herself to her husband and daughters. Yet to her amazement, she begins an affair with a handsome young radical, and her erotic awakening throws her old certainties into chaos.

* **Bento Box in the Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood in Whitebread America-Linda Furiya (Memoir)**

While growing up in Versailles, an Indiana farm community, Linda Furiya tried to balance the outside world of Midwestern America with the Japanese traditions of her home life. As the only Asian family in a tiny township, Furiya's life revolved around Japanese food and the extraordinary lengths her parents went to in order to gather the ingredients needed to prepare it. As immigrants, her parents approached the challenges of living in America, and maintaining their Japanese diets, with optimism and gusto. Furiva, meanwhile, was acutely aware of how food set her apart from her peers: She spent her first day of school hiding in the girls' restroom, examining her rice balls and chopsticks, and longing for a Peanut Bullter and Jelly sandwich.

* **Brief Chapter in My Impossible Life-Dana Reinhardt (Fiction)**

Simone’s starting her junior year in high school. Her mom’s a lawyer for the ACLU, her dad’s a political cartoonist, so she’s grown up standing outside the organic food coop asking people to sign petitions for worthy causes. She’s got a terrific younger brother and amazing friends. And she’s got a secret crush on a really smart and funny guy–who spends all of his time with another girl. Then her birth mother contacts her. Simone’s always known she was adopted, but she never wanted to know anything about it. She’s happy with her family just as it is, thank you. She learns who her birth mother was–a 16-year-old girl named Rivka. Who is Rivka? Why has she contacted Simone? Why now? The answers lead Simone to deeper feelings of anguish and love than she has ever known, and to question everything she once took for granted about faith, life, the afterlife, and what it means to be a daughter.

* **China’s Ghost: My Daughter’s Journey to America, My Passage to Fatherhood-Jeff Gammage (Memoir)**

Aching to expand from a couple to a family, Jeff Gammage—a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*—and his wife, Christine, embarked upon a journey that would carry them across a shifting landscape of emotion and through miles of red tape and bureaucratic protocol. On the other side of the world—in the smog-choked city of Changsha in Hunan Province—a silent, stoic little girl was waiting for them: Jin Yu, their new daughter. Now they would have to learn how to fully embrace a life altered beyond recognition by new concerns and responsibilities—and by a love unlike any they'd ever felt before.

* **Double Luck: Memoirs of a Chinese Orphan-Lu Chi Fa (Memoir)**

Tells the story of the author's struggles after being orphaned at the age of three and how he held on to his dream of coming to the United States as he passed from one relative to another and was even sold to a Communist couple.

* **Dreams of My Father: a Story of Race and Inheritance-Barack Obama (Memoir)**

The story of Obama’s struggle to understand the forces that shaped him as the son of a black African father and white American mother—a struggle that takes him from the American heartland to the ancestral home of his great-aunt in the tiny African village of Alego.

* **Falling Leaves: The Memoir of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter-Adeline Mah (Memoir)**

Born in 1937 in a port city a thousand miles north of Shanghai, Adeline Yen Mah was the youngest child of an affluent Chinese family who enjoyed rare privileges during a time of political and cultural upheaval. But wealth and position could not shield Adeline from a childhood of appalling emotional abuse at the hands of a cruel and manipulative Eurasian stepmother. Determined to survive through her enduring faith in family unity, Adeline struggled for independence as she moved from Hong Kong to England and eventually to the United States to become a physician and writer.

* **Funny in Farsi: a Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America-Firoozeh (Memoir)**

Funny in Farsi chronicles the American journey of Dumas’s wonderfully engaging family: her engineer father, a sweetly quixotic dreamer who first sought riches on Bowling for Dollars and in Las Vegas, and later lost his job during the Iranian revolution; her elegant mother, who never fully mastered English (nor cared to); her uncle, who combated the effects of American fast food with an army of miraculous American weight-loss gadgets; and Firoozeh herself, who as a girl changed her name to Julie, and who encountered a second wave of culture shock when she met and married a Frenchman, becoming part of a one-couple melting pot.

* **He Forgot to Say to Say Good-bye-Benjamie Alire Saenz (Fiction)**

Ramiro Lopez and Jake Upthegrove don't appear to have much in common. Ram lives in the Mexican-American working-class barrio of El Paso called "Dizzy Land." His brother is sinking into a world of drugs, wreaking havoc in their household. Jake is a rich West Side white boy who has developed a problem managing his anger. An only child, he is a misfit in his mother's shallow and materialistic world. But Ram and Jake do have one thing in common: They are lost boys who have never met their fathers. This sad fact has left both of them undeniably scarred and obsessed with the men who abandoned them. As Jake and Ram overcome their suspicions of each other, they begin to move away from their loner existences and realize that they are capable of reaching out beyond their wounds and the neighborhoods that they grew up in. Their friendship becomes a healing in a world of hurt.

* **I’m Down-Mishna Wolff (Memoir)**

Mishna Wolff grew up in a poor black neighborhood with her single father, a white man who truly believed he was black.  “He strutted around with a short perm, a Cosby-esqe sweater, gold chains and a Kangol—telling jokes like Redd Fox, and giving advice like Jesse Jackson.  You couldn’t tell my father he was white.  Believe me, I tried,” writes Wolff.  And so from early childhood on, her father began his crusade to make his white daughter *Down*.

* **I am Nujood, Age 10, Divorced-Ali Nujood (Memoir)**

Forced by her father to marry a man three times her age, young Nujood Ali was sent away from her parents and beloved sisters and made to live with her husband and his family in an isolated village in rural Yemen. There she suffered daily from physical and emotional abuse by her mother-in-law and nightly at the rough hands of her spouse. Flouting his oath to wait to have sexual relations with Nujood until she was no longer a child, he took her virginity on their wedding night. She was only ten years old.

* **Interpreter of Maladies-Jhumpa Lahiri (Short Stories)**

Mr. Kapasi, the protagonist of Jhumpa Lahiri's title story, would certainly have his work cut out for him if he were forced to interpret the maladies of all the characters in this eloquent debut collection. Take, for example, Shoba and Shukumar, the young couple in "A Temporary Matter" whose marriage is crumbling in the wake of a stillborn child. Or Miranda in "Sexy," who is involved in a hopeless affair with a married man. But Mr. Kapasi has problems enough of his own; in addition to his regular job working as an interpreter for a doctor who does not speak his patients' language, he also drives tourists to local sites of interest. His fare on this particular day is Mr. and Mrs. Das--first-generation Americans of Indian descent--and their children. During the course of the afternoon, Mr. Kapasi becomes enamored of Mrs. Das and then becomes her unwilling confidant when she reads too much into his profession. "I told you because of your talents," she informs him after divulging a startling secret.

* **In the Time of Butterflies-Julia Alvarez (Fiction)**

It is November 25, 1960, and three beautiful sisters have been found near their wrecked Jeep at the bottom of a 150-foot cliff on the north coast of the Dominican Republic. The official state newspaper reports their deaths as accidental. It does not mention that a fourth sister lives. Nor does it explain that the sisters were among the leading opponents of Gen. Rafael Leonidas Trujillo’s dictatorship. It doesn’t have to. Everybody knows of Las Mariposas—“The Butterflies.”

* **Known World-Edward P. Jones (Fiction)**

*The Known World* tells the story of Henry Townsend, a black farmer and former slave who falls under the tutelage of William Robbins, the most powerful man in Manchester County, Virginia. Making certain he never circumvents the law, Townsend runs his affairs with unusual discipline. But when death takes him unexpectedly, his widow, Caldonia, can't uphold the estate's order, and chaos ensues. Jones has woven a footnote of history into an epic that takes an unflinching look at slavery in all its moral complexities.

* **Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier-Ishmael Beah (Memoir)**

In *A Long Way Gone*, Beah, now twenty-five years old, tells a riveting story: how at the age of twelve, he fled attacking rebels and wandered a land rendered unrecognizable by violence. By thirteen, he'd been picked up by the government army, and Beah, at heart a gentle boy, found that he was capable of truly terrible acts.

* **Mexican Whiteboy-Matt De la Pena (Fiction)**

Danny's tall and skinny. Even though he’s not built, his arms are long enough to give his pitch a power so fierce any college scout would sign him on the spot. Ninety-five mile per hour fastball, but the boy’s not even on a team. Every time he gets up on the mound he loses it. But at his private school they don’t expect much from him. Danny’s half Mexican. And growing up in San Diego means everyone else knows exactly who he is before they find out he can’t speak Spanish, and before they realize his mom has blond hair and blue eyes. And that’s why he’s spending the summer with his dad’s family. To find himself, he might just hav Looking for an escape from childhood abuse, Reymundo Sanchez turned away from school and baseball to drugs, alcohol, and then sex, and was left to fend for himself before age 14. The Latin Kings, one of the largest and most notorious street gangs in America, became his refuge and his world, but its violence cost him friends, freedom, self-respect, and nearly his life. This is a raw and powerful odyssey through the ranks of the new mafia, where the only people more dangerous than rival gangs are members of your own gang, who in one breath will say they'll die for you and in the next will order your assassination. e to face the demons.

* **Silent Tears: A Journey of Hope in a Chinese Orphanage-Kay Bratt (Memoir)**

When her family relocated to rural China in 2003, Kay Bratt was thrust into a new world, one where boys were considered more valuable than girls and poverty and the one-child policy had created an epidemic of abandoned infants. As a volunteer at a local orphanage, Bratt witnessed conditions that were unfathomable to a middle-class mother of two from South Carolina.

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Mende Nazer lost her childhood at age twelve, when she was sold into slavery. It all began one horrific night in 1993, when Arab raiders swept through her Nuba village, murdering the adults and rounding up thirty-one children, including Mende. Mende was sold to a wealthy Arab family who lived in Sudan's capital city, Khartoum. So began her dark years of enslavement. Her Arab owners called her "Yebit," or "black slave." She called them "master." She was subjected to appalling physical, sexual, and mental abuse. She slept in a shed and ate the family leftovers like a dog. She had no rights, no freedom, and no life of her own.

* **The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven-Sherman Alexie (Short Stories)**

These twenty-two interlinked tales are narrated by characters raised on humiliation and government-issue cheese, and yet are filled with passion and affection, myth and dream. Against a backdrop of alcohol, car accidents, laughter, and basketball, Alexie depicts the distances between Indians and whites, reservation Indians and urban Indians, men and women, and, most poetically, modern Indians and the traditions of the past.

* **Stealing Buddha’s Dinner-Bich Minh Nguyen**

In *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, the glossy branded allure of Pringles, Kit Kats, and Toll House Cookies becomes an ingenious metaphor for Nguyen's struggle to become a "real" American, a distinction that brings with it the dream of the perfect school lunch, burgers and Jell- O for dinner, and a visit from the Kool-Aid man.

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* **The Other Wes Moore-Wes Moore (Memoir)**

Two kids named Wes Moore were born blocks apart within a year of each other. Both grew up fatherless in similar Baltimore neighborhoods and had difficult childhoods; both hung out on street corners with their crews; both ran into trouble with the police. How, then, did one grow up to be a Rhodes Scholar, decorated veteran, White House Fellow, and business leader, while the other ended up a convicted murderer serving a life sentence?

* **Zeitoun-Dave Eggers (Nonfiction)**

The true story of one family, caught between America’s two biggest policy disasters: the war on terror and the response to Hurricane Katrina. Abdulrahman and Kathy Zeitoun run a house-painting business in New Orleans. In August of 2005, as Hurricane Katrina approaches, Kathy evacuates with their four young children, leaving Zeitoun to watch over the business. In the days following the storm he travels the city by canoe, feeding abandoned animals and helping elderly neighbors. Then, on September 6th, police officers armed with M-16s arrest Zeitoun in his home. Told with eloquence and compassion, Zeitoun is a riveting account of one family’s unthinkable struggle with forces beyond wind and water.

**The Road of Lost Innocence: The True Story of a Cambodian Heroine-Somaly Man (Memoir)**

Born in a village deep in the Cambodian forest, Somaly Mam was sold into sexual slavery by her grandfather when she was twelve years old. For the next decade she was shuttled through the brothels that make up the sprawling sex trade of Southeast Asia. She suffered unspeakable acts of brutality and witnessed horrors that would haunt her for the rest of her life–until, in her early twenties, she managed to escape. Unable to forget the girls she left behind, Mam became a tenacious and brave leader in the fight against human trafficking, rescuing sex workers–some as young as five and six–offering them shelter, rehabilitation, healing, and love and leading them into new life.

* **What is the What-Dave Eggers (Fiction)**

Based on the life of Valentino Achak Deng who, along with thousands of other children —the so-called Lost Boys—was forced to leave his village in Sudan at the age of seven and trek hundreds of miles by foot, pursued by militias, government bombers, and wild animals, crossing the deserts of three countries to find freedom. When he finally is resettled in the United States, he finds a life full of promise, but also heartache and myriad new challenges.

* **Parrot in the Oven-Victor Martinez (Fiction)**
* “Dad believed people were like money. You could be a thousand-dollar person or a hundred-dollar person -- even a ten-, five-, or one-dollar person. Below that, everybody was just nickels and dimes. To my dad, we were pennies.” Fourteen-year-old Manny Hernandez wants to be more than just a penny. He wants to be a vato firme, the kind of guy people respect. But that′s not easy when your father is abusive, your brother can′t hold a job, and your mother scrubs the house as if she can wash her troubles away . In Manny′s neighborhood, the way to get respect is to be in a gang. But Manny′s not sure that joining a gang is the solution. Because, after all, it′s his life -- and he wants to be the one to decide what happens to it.
* **Random Family: Love, Drugs and Coming to Age in the Bronx-Adrian Nicole LeBlanc (Nonfiction)**

Adrian Nicole LeBlanc immerses readers in the intricacies of the ghetto, revealing the true sagas lurking behind the headlines of gangsta glamour, gold-drenched drug dealers, and street-corner society.

* **The Bluest Eye-Toni Morrison (Fiction)**

Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl, prays every day for beauty. Mocked by other children for the dark skin, curly hair, and brown eyes that set her apart, she yearns for normalcy, for the blond hair and blue eyes that she believes will allow her to finally fit in.Yet as her dream grows more fervent, her life slowly starts to disintegrate in the face of adversity and strife.

* **Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood-Benjamin Alire Saenz (Fiction)**

The Hollywood where Sammy Santos and Juliana Rios live is not the one on the West Coast, the one with all the glitz and glitter. This Hollywood is a tough barrio at the edges of a small town in southern New Mexico. The year is 1969 and Sammy and his fellow citizens of Hollywood attend Las Cruces High School where they face a world of racism, dress codes, the war in Vietnam and the everyday violence of their own barrio. In the summer before his senior year begins, Sammy falls in love with Juliana, a girl whose tough veneer disguises a world of hurt. mmy and Juliana in Hollywood-Benjamin Alire Saenz (Fiction)

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*-Compiled by Lucia Musilli*

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